

# ***Finding God in... Affliction***

## **Psalm 137**

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I wonder if you would agree with my grandpa?

One day at the dinner table family devotions he was reading Psalm 137.

As he came to the end of the passage it drew out of him an incredibly strong gut reaction.

Read it with me, please:

### PSALM 137 p.608

My grandfather **ripped** that page right out of his bible, exclaiming “*That has no place there! I don’t ever want to read that again!*”

What do you think?

Was he correct in doing so?

Psalm 137 is set in the time when Israel had been exiled to Babylon.

Their own children had been murdered in the way verse 9 describes. Houses burned. Land ruined. Horrible suffering.

Which raises the question:

What do we do as believers with such suffering,  
and the cries of pain that come from it?

At Christmas time, particularly. But anytime, really.

I’ve got a few thoughts I’d like to share with you, but before we do, let’s pray.

### PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

What do we do with suffering?

And how, if at all, can we come to know God through it?

Beginning here with my grandfather and his biblical vandalism.

Wondering, with him, what in the world is going on in this dark Psalm?

Something we need to realize is that Psalms are more often than not **descriptive** in nature, not **prescriptive**. That is, they tell us how the writer is feeling and what he is experiencing.

It is not so that we should consider the Psalms as command words from God in a “*do this, not that; speak such and not like so*” kind of way.

The Psalms are more a “*show 'n tell*” for deep expressions of pain, raging against injustice, and a heaven-ward cry, seeking response.

I believe the Holy Spirit inspired the Psalms to be included in Scripture to coach believers in their own pain; granting them permission to face and express it.

Life brings plenty of anguish, and hiding it, pretending that it doesn't exist or doesn't happen to us, is sheer folly.

Psalms are signposts that say, “Go ahead and express your pain to God. He'll hear you. He won't zap you for doing it. He can handle it.”

Verse 3 of Psalm 137 speaks about the mockery of the captors, wanting the Jews to sing joyful songs about their homeland; wanting them to put a public mask of joy over the reality of bitter suffering.

But it just isn't possible.

It makes no sense.

And friends – God nowhere demands it.

Psalm 137 is messy, it actually ends without resolution.  
Which is like so much of life.

More questions than answers.

More heavy times than light ones.

It is what the Old Testament depicts.

It is a pattern that continues in the New Testament, which is also very transparent about the reality of suffering.

Ah, yes, sometimes there are brilliant moments of relief from suffering. Healings, even resurrections. Lazarus raised from the dead. Peter miraculously released from prison.

But there is also much ongoing turmoil. Steven the deacon is unjustly arrested and executed. James is beheaded.

And what is perplexing is that there is no clear pattern, no simple formula that connects the suffering times and the times of miraculous release. Life seems to jump from one to the other.

For example, in Acts 12 James, one of Jesus' best friends, is murdered. Then Peter is put in jail. After intense prayer, he is miraculously released. But – why him? Why no angel to save James?

As I survey Scripture it seems to me that the reality of suffering is the groundwork on which the story of Salvation is built.

And so every miracle, every healing, every resurrection, every provision becomes a sort of billboard pointing towards the New Creation Order that God through Jesus is working towards.

It is coming.

But it is not yet fully here.

God's power is at work.

His promise that all the pain and suffering will one day be eradicated, and death itself destroyed, and injustice turned into righteousness – that promise is sure, not forgotten, and even now is in the process of being fulfilled.

Every miracle is a pointer towards that.

But that is all they are – pointers towards the new normal that Jesus will usher in on the day of his return. But it is not yet how things mostly are; not yet the way we can expect it to generally be.

Not even for believers.

Hence the bible tells us of the suffering of even those closest to Jesus.

2 Corinthians 12 speaks of St. Paul receiving a taste of what heaven will be like, and at the very same time getting something in his life that he describes as a thorn; a pain that is sharp, insistent, significant, and won't go away.

He asks for relief and God simply says, “No.... You will remain weak. What you will get is the presence of my strength **in the midst of** your weakness. And that will be enough.”

So Paul has to stop praying for relief. And pray instead for strength.

My own conviction is that as believers we pray for relief, we pray for the miracle of God to be at work, we pray for signs of the New Creation to be revealed – and we **keep** doing so.

We keep banging on the doors of heaven **until and unless** the Holy Spirit makes it very clear that we ought to stop. (see Luke 18)

Which still leaves all sorts of questions, doesn't it.

Including:

- Can it be possible to find God in the face of suffering?
- Can we, in that, find hope?

And, hey, there is plenty of suffering to go round.

My grandpa encountered it in Psalm 137 and the exile experience of Israel.

But it is not just there.

Exile is all around us.

All of Creation is, in a deep and real way, in exile.

The Germans have a rich word to describe “exile.”

It is “*Elende*.”

It literally means “Chased out of where you ought to be.”

However, it is **also** a word that carries strong connotations to suffering.

In German Ps 119:50 says, “Das ist mein Trost in meinem *Elende*”

Translated - “*this is my comfort in my affliction...*”

Ever since the Fall Creation and all humanity has been in exile.  
Experiencing *elende*.

Revelation 21 prophecies about the end of *elende*, the end of exile and suffering when God will wipe every tear away, death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more....

....but we're not there, yet.

*Elende* is real.  
It is everywhere.

Earlier this week a conversation reminded me that it's been almost four years since the earthquake hit Haiti.

We've all seen the images of *elende* in that island nation.

We're going to watch a video clip from someone who went there as a volunteer nurse. I must warn you – the images are raw and difficult. And the message painful.

It describes cholera, a disease that has killed thousands of Haitians.

My brother and his wife are headed back there in a couple of weeks with Lifewater.ca.

They've been working these last four years to bring secure water supplies to communities.

If you're wondering where to send a Christmas donation – here's a shameless plug. As a church we've taken offerings that have helped Lifewater with projects in that country. Thank you for your support!

The suffering is IMMENSE.

Watch this video blog:

### ***I HATE CHOLERA***

I've watched this clip a bunch of times while preparing for this morning.  
And each time tears well up.

For the Haitians. Just absolutely awful.

And there are tears for my late sister, who spent one of her last Christmas seasons working as a doctor in one of these cholera clinics.

As I reflected I realized that part of the pain I felt was also the pain of *elende* within this congregation. This has been a hard year for some of our families – experiencing affliction in

different ways with brokenness and death. We've had some terrifically good times this year here at KCRC..... but also experienced real *elende*.

It is real, and as much as we celebrate, we also feel and name the pain. Yes – even at Christmas!

How do we find God in all this?

Let's conclude by going to Jeremiah 29.

This is a passage where God speaks to the prophet at the same time and place in history where Psalm 137 was written. The time of national *elende*.

Psalm 137 is the peoples' expression of pain.

Jeremiah 29 is God speaking into the situation of those exiles.

### Jeremiah 29:4-14 p.763

Do you hear what God says to the people in suffering, in exile – in *elende*?

- ***Don't run from it.*** (v.5)
- ***Live your full life in that dark place.*** (v.6)
- ***Seek the welfare of that place.*** (v.7)
- ***Relief will not necessarily come quickly – no shortcuts.*** (v.10)
- ***One day I will set you free.*** (v.11)

And, throughout this whole time – living and struggling through the exile-suffering, and then eventually finding release – comes the call to reach towards the Lord:

***- search for me and find me... search with all your heart....*** (v.13)

Those same principles extend down through time to us, friends.

With one big difference – we receive them through the lens of Christmas.

We hear the call to:

- not run from suffering
- live life as best we can in dark times and places
- seek the welfare of the suffering around us
- remember that this may be a long-haul struggle
- in all that, search for God with all our heart

knowing that God **has come** into the *elende* of a Creation that groans, where thorns and thistles rule the day;

He **has come** through his Son who entered our suffering and took it upon himself.

**This** is the heart of Christmas.

That Christ came not to insulate us from, or empower us to avoid, suffering.

He came to us **in the midst of** suffering.

His Spirit gives power to endure and live **through** the suffering.

His Promise of heaven, and a New Creation, give hope when suffering is tinged with death.

Which is how the patients and staff in the cholera clinic could worship.

Even while terribly ill, and even while dying.

One of the carols we all love to sing is "Joy To The World."

Remember verse 3?

*No more let sin and sorrow grow  
Nor thorns infest the ground;  
He comes to make his blessings flow  
Far as the curse is found!*

Believe that, friends.

In your own *elende*, your own dark times and struggle, remember that.

Pray for, look for, the inner strength and comfort and hope that the living Spirit of Jesus can bring to you when you call to Jesus in prayer.

And believe it, with full defiance against the seemingly so-entrenched power of sin and sorrow as we recite each week these words that close our worship:

*Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ **will** come again!*

And, when suffering comes, don't ignore it.

**DO** pray for relief. Fight the *elende*.

And, in those times when the suffering isn't personally yours, but you encounter it in others, live the challenge of Jeremiah 29.

Move **towards** that suffering, rather than running **away** from it.

This year again I've met people who say, "*I don't do nursing homes or hospitals. They weird me out.*" I'm giving you the Christmas challenge of working to overcome that.

Be like the volunteers who collected bags of food last weekend for the Food Bank.

Move **towards** the struggle, like those who provide pastoral care at the hospital, or go to sing on Sunday afternoons at Bayfield, rekindling faith in minds that the cruel effects of aging have dimmed.

Move **towards elende** by picking up the phone and calling your neighbor that you know is having a hard time; and bring over a pot of soup.

Move **towards** pain and persecution, like the one who calls out on Facebook for prayers for persecuted believers the Middle East.

And, when you can't go in person, move **towards** the struggle against sin and sorrow with your prayers and donations. Like when we take an offering today for our Deacons, or in early 2016 for World Renew.

As you move **towards** those who struggle, and you do so intentionally in the name of Jesus, know what else?

There is a very good chance that they will come to know God in their suffering,  
**through**

**your**

**presence.**

I want to conclude with these words from the blog of the nurse who prepared the video we watched. She said:

The most recent of emails I have received was from the organization asking if I would once again return to work in the cholera clinics during their rainy season. They are projecting 800,000 people will be infected with cholera. Can I save 800,000 in 2 weeks? Nope. I cant even save 800. 80 will be a stretch. But I can wholeheartedly love and care for 8 people. May not seem like much but ask those 8.